

Hill Op-Ed

Over recent weeks, a number of reports have appeared in the media, detailing events in Bahrain and interpreting their potential political implications. As hosts of the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, for more than 60 years and a key trading partner to the US, having signed the Free Trade Agreement in 2006, it is important to clarify any misconceptions over Bahrain's democratic values and provide some context to this period of disquiet.

As many in Washington will know, Bahrain is a proud regional leader in democratic reform. We are champions of encouraging the participation of women, individuals of different beliefs and faiths and all citizens, in our vibrant and growing civil society that, nevertheless, remains guided by the traditions and values of our culture.

On October 23rd, we will be hosting our third Parliamentary elections with universal suffrage following the democratic reforms introduced by His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, which were overwhelmingly voted for by all Bahrainis in 2001. This was a significant step for our country and it should not be forgotten that this decision was made by Bahrain independently - it was not a decision forced upon us.

With increased participation, every democracy faces protest and dissent. This is something we welcome, as part of a vibrant democratic society. But while protest and dissent are acceptable forms of free speech, violence and rioting - organized or otherwise - are not. We are building a democracy underpinned by the consistent and just application of the rule of law that can be a model in our region. To accomplish this goal, our authorities must maintain order and protect the rights of all our citizens to live in peace and uphold these values, and to protect our democratically enacted constitution.

Following an intensive period of intelligence gathering by Bahrain's security services, compelling evidence emerged that there was a sophisticated network organizing and choreographing violence and unrest with the objective of overthrowing the legitimate rule of the Kingdom and its constitution. This extended from violent confrontations with authorities and the blocking of major highways with burning tyres, to the sabotage of infrastructure and the dissemination of malicious propaganda. Further, it emerged that the network members included many figures, who had rejected the reforms we introduced and who have spent the last decade agitating, rather than working through the new democratic institutions established.

Such activities could not be tolerated and the level of organization indicated that an ever growing threat to the security of the nation was at stake. Fomenting violence and unrest in any form cannot be taken as a pretext for further reform. The reforms instituted in the Kingdom set up a legal system of airing grievances. Our system makes it possible for all of the citizens of the Kingdom to resolve differences in a civilized, democratic matter. These channels must be used if our country is to develop and progress.

Several of the figures arrested had already previously received Royal pardons - some thirteen in total - in respect of similar, earlier activities, for which they had been convicted following due legal process. Instead recognizing an opportunity to reform and adopt a peaceful, participatory approach to airing grievances, they chose to interpret the pardons as a sign they were above the law.

There can never be a justifiable reason to incite violence in Bahrain. All of us are responsible partners and the rule of law is a responsibility of both government and citizens alike. We are a tolerant, open and

free society underpinned by freedom of expression and we are proud to uphold these rights for all.

Further, I can give categorical assurance that any fears expressed regarding any detainees' rights and freedoms in Bahrain are unfounded, and Bahrain is bound by the United Nations Convention against torture and other human rights treaties. My Government takes its responsibilities in this regard extremely seriously. I can also confirm that the trials of all those involved will be open, public and impartial. Defendants will be fully entitled to representation of their choosing and I have little doubt that their interests will be vigorously defended.

More broadly, we are aware that we are still a very young and growing democracy and that it takes time for society to adapt. This process of democratic change in the region is uncommon and we are extremely proud of the achievements we have made to date.

I look back at the challenges the United States overcame in developing its grand experiment with democracy. The model for freedom that was set then, is now emulated around the world. And yet even in the United States, democracy did not come for all people when independence was declared in 1776.

The current situation in Bahrain should be seen within this, and its own regional context. We are nurturing a democratic society in keeping with our traditions and cultural values. This process takes time, but we are determined to succeed.

ENDS

(This document was submitted by Qorvis Communications on behalf of the Ambassador of the Kingdom of Bahrain to the United States).

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